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Dismantling the Patriarchy: Thriving as an Ecosystem

Molly Tamulevich is a long time animal advocate and scholar. An animal studies fellow at Michigan State University, she has written about the intersection of animal and human marginalization for stubbydog.org. She currently makes guacamole at Whole Foods and dreams of a day when she can get paid to work outside with a pack of dogs. Molly is also a consultant at the Animals and Society Institute, a think tank that supports practice to address the relation between animal cruelty and other violence and promotes action to protect animals through the adoption of ethical, compassionate public policy. She shares her home with one human, two rats and two guinea pigs.

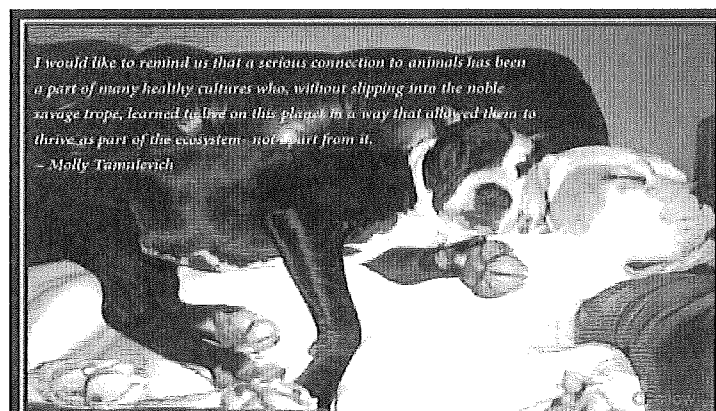
[content note: violence against women, violence against animals, de-humanization, marginalization]

It's a well-known fact among scholars and activists alike that violent people are often violent towards animals¹. Popular culture has imprinted the notion on our collective brains that a serial killer often begins his career by torturing animals, that a trail of mutilated furry (or scaly, or slimy) bodies is a sure-fire way to find the next Manson or Bundy. Here's the deal, though. When we think of animal mutilation, abuse, or harm as the first step in an escalating progression, we ignore the fact that it is in itself a terrible act. As feminists, we need to redefine animal abuse as family abuse and expand our sphere of compassion and care to encompass the lived experience of non-human animals. By doing so, we can exercise our non-binary thinking and honor the joy, pain and worthiness of others, thereby setting an example for those around us both personally and professionally. Therefore, I'd like to put forward an alternative way of thinking about how a feminist ethic can and should incorporate the stories of animals as we advocate for the inclusion of all marginalized voices.

Many of us are already well versed in intersectionality. We acknowledge that the various 'isms' of the world, racism, sexism, gender bias, homophobia, classism, are all part of the same mindset that classifies groups into categories that eventually become oppressed or oppressive. We recognize that there's something wrong when a serial killer who murders women of color, low income people, and sex workers is not pursued rigorously or granted much media coverage. We read articles about how the Sandy Hook shootings received non-stop attention while the ever-growing number of children dying of gun violence in Chicago is not sensational enough for national news. We know that where an individual falls on the spectrum of social acceptability and importance drastically affects the likelihood that they will suffer violence and find a way to escape that violence- and yet, even after reading and researching and advocating for years, I still find myself reluctant to raise my hand and stammer, "What about the animals?" for fear of judgment.

Before you judge me for what many have called 'misplaced priorities', **I would like to remind us that a serious connection to animals has been a part of many healthy cultures who, without slipping into the noble savage trope, learned to live on this planet in a way that allowed them to thrive as part of the ecosystem- not apart from it.* The origin stories of many cultures begin something like this: "A long time ago, there was a creature on this Earth, and from the adventures and realizations and children of that creature, our culture was born. Our bodies are made of the plants and animals and ether of the Earth; they are an integral part of who we are. The community of life on this planet is intimately connected." This sentiment is echoed in social science, where scholars such as Donna Haraway have declared that human beings are not a species apart from others; we are a site of life, a conglomeration of bacteria colonies, viruses, DNA intermingling with the plants and animals who we encounter through daily life and evolution. In less esoteric terms, human beings are not a closed system; we share saliva and germs and food sources with our family, friends and strangers, whether they are human or not. In the words of Whitman, we contain multitudes. We must be careful, then, of the exceptionalism trap- the thinking that has, for years, segregated women, minorities and, I would argue, other species, into categories that are deemed more or less deserving of care. This is the thinking that starts with, "It's just a....". Just a bitch, just a slut, just a dog, just a kid, just trash. When someone is "Just a" they cease to be a she or he or zim or hir and become inanimate, unimportant.

Many people object to animal activism because they believe that animal issues should only be addressed after human needs are met. A woman once told me that she would care about animals once all the starving children were safe. I believe that this binary thinking and species-based hierarchy is counterproductive. Animals, women and other oppressed groups have long suffered the same mistreatment. For an in-depth examination of the parallels between the objectification of animals and the objectification of women, Carol Adams' A Sexual Politics of Meat is a must-read. Essentially, she argues that women and animals, particularly animals used for food, are reduced to their parts and their services. When any living being is viewed as a tool to be used, their needs are easy to explain away and violence against them is easily justified. Feminist thinking reminds us that everyday stories are important,



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that patriarchal accounts of history have systematically devalued the worth of anyone who does not support the dominant narrative of Man conquering Nature. The nature-culture debate has objectified women and animals similarly, pitting them against Culture, Progress and Development in ways that have led many to attempt a separation from our animal brothers and sisters and use the obvious physical differences that divide us as a jumping off point to justify human exceptionalism and superiority. This tactic, however, has been dangerous in the past and continues to be dangerous today.



Throughout the history of civil rights, there have been episodes of inclusion and episodes of exclusion. The women's movement has an ugly history of racism, the fight against racism of homophobia, the gay rights movement of transphobia. In the quest for legitimacy, our activism seems to splinter. We have historically made choices about who to include in order to gain public support for our cause. Until recently, animals have been considered a low priority, an indulgence taken up by those who care more for other species than our own. Even within the sphere of animal advocacy, certain breeds and species are prioritized in order to gain public support: A pit bull's euthanasia will likely spark less sympathy than a golden retriever's, a mouse's death less than a cat's. An act of cruelty toward a hamster may be the source of jest, while the child who witnesses the act may be deeply traumatized because they have not yet learned that their pet was "just a".

In the domestic violence prevention movement, inclusion is particularly important. Recent studies have shown that many adults who commit violent crimes witnessed animal abuse as children². Additionally, women in abusive situations often delay leaving due to fears that an abuser will harm their animals. If the needs of animals are not accounted for and their well-being is not considered, everyone in the family may suffer. Domestic violence does not follow a precise model; its fingers close around many throats at once. It is important, then, that the recognition of non-human animals as thinking, feeling beings worthy of protection from harm gains momentum. Too often, those who discredit the importance of animals do so by belittling people who care about them, snidely insinuating that caring about animals is feminine, soft, and therefore, illegitimate. As feminists, we are advocates for those whose stories have been pushed to the side. We must recognize that violence against animals is violence against us all. We must speak up however we can. In the words of William Ralph Inge, "Deliberate cruelty to our defenceless and beautiful little cousins is surely one of the meanest and most detestable vices of which a human being can be guilty." Kindness and all its rippling effects is a value that we can certainly champion, and one that we can practice each day with every person and animal that we meet.

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